

Citation for Mr John So JP, former Lord Mayor of Melbourne

John So is a Melbourne icon. His inclusive style and dedication to community while in public office and through his work in business have helped to highlight and elevate our nation's rich history and connections with Asia.

Born in Hong Kong, John came to Melbourne as a teenager in the early 1960s, completing secondary education at University High School and graduating with a Diploma of Education and Bachelor of Science from The University of Melbourne. He taught physics at Fitzroy High School but his growing sense of entrepreneurship soon led him to the world of business.

He opened the Dragon Boat restaurant in Flinders Lane in 1976 and went on to establish businesses in Australia, Hong Kong and China. Intertwined with his growing business networks was his passion and pride in the Chinese community in Melbourne and its special relationship with China. Dating back to the 1850s gold rush, Melbourne Chinatown is the longest continually inhabited Chinese district in the world outside China.

John entered local politics in 1991 as an independent on Melbourne City Council. While on the council he also served as Commissioner of the Ethnic Affairs Commission, from 1991 to 1993, and in a number of other community posts.

In 2001 he became the first Melbourne Lord Mayor to be directly elected by the people, and the first of Asian descent.

John went on to serve for seven-and-a-half years, becoming the longest-serving Mayor of Melbourne before his retirement. He was an extraordinarily popular and leading figure in the blossoming of Melbourne as a major international city. It has been said that, as Lord Mayor, John worked tirelessly to bring the city to life and give it personality. He encouraged a vibrant retail sector, exciting waterfront entertainment precincts, and a portfolio of international sporting and cultural events. One of John's greatest achievements is assisting Melbourne's positioning as one of the world's top destinations for international students.

John focused on expanding Melbourne's links with Asia and established strong sister-city links around the world but particularly with Asia, including relationships with Osaka, Japan, and Tianjin, China. Under his guidance, the creation of the Asian Business Partner City network, delivered cooperative agreements with Guangzhou, Foshan, Nanjing, Hong Kong and Shanghai. His popularity throughout the Melbourne community – not just the Asian community – grew enormously through his affable style and high visibility

promoting the city.

The most public example of this was during the 2006 Commonwealth Games, which he helped to bring together with such success. When John's name was announced at the opening ceremony there was a rousing reception and the city was filled with people wearing t shirts proclaiming John So – he's our bro.

In 2006, John's promotion of Melbourne nationally and internationally resulted in him being named World Mayor by the international World Mayor Project – the first Asian mayor to win the title.

In 2007 he received an honorary doctorate from Victoria University in recognition of his service in local government. That year he was also among 11 recipients of the You Bring Charm to the World Award, presented at Peking University in Beijing, and was recognised as one of the "Most influential Chinese".

John chairs the Global Business Council, an international body established by the World Chinese Economic Forum in Malaysia, which aims to facilitate trade between China, India, ASEAN and Middle East. In December 2013 he was appointed by the Chinese Government as a Special Adviser to the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese.

In John's own words, "embracing diversity is the Australian way", and he continues to do that.

John So is an exceptional representative for Melbourne and for Australia, and he continues to make an outstanding contribution to building relationships on all levels between Asia and Australia.